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CONTINUING

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THE Bible does not occupy the supreme position to which it is so frequently assigned. It is in general a neglected book. There are large classes of readers and thinkers who almost wholly ignore it. Even among those who should pay it high regard it has fallen into the background. Of those who were nurtured almost within its sacred precincts, many have practically abandoned it. These people were in most cases anxious to hold to it, but for reasons to them good and sufficient, they have laid it aside as a kind of riddle and insoluble mystery. When asked why they neglect the sacred book their reply is ready. They place before the questioner the hindrances which have blocked their way. They acknowledge their attitude of indifference, or perhaps skepticism, and express a longing for relief. Many of them desire with all their hearts to understand the Scriptures and again confide in them.

THE work of propagating Bible study has brought to light some interesting facts. Appeal to thoughtful readers has called forth the cry of disappointed hearts. Men who clung long and tenaciously to the Bible, answer, when brought to task, that they had been forced by christian men to let go. Many students, whose chief purpose was to herald the glad tidings, have almost drifted to sea without anchor or compass. Instead of occupying a place of great popularity even as literature, the Bible is the

unpopular and the undesired book. Have we put the case too strongly? No. The diagnosis of the situation is correct. What now is the cause of the difficulty? What is the occasion of this drifting?

THE responsibility, according to the declaration of those who have lost interest in the Bible, rests upon so called christian scholarship. From the church fathers down to the present day the interpreters of the Bible have brought to their task certain *a priori* theories. These prepossessions have been their standards of measurement. All Scripture must be so interpreted as to fit these standards. The forced conformation of the Bible to certain assumptions necessarily wrested many passages from their obvious sense. This evil sooner or later produced a far reaching harvest. Volumes of commentaries, old and new, popular homiletical treatises, current newspaper expositions and pulpit utterances—all give us the results of those early methods of handling the Word. The subterfuges adopted, the ingenious attempts to harmonize difficulties and minimize perplexities have confused the careful reader, and have forced him into the position of the doubter. He has said to himself, "If such irrational and inconsistent methods of procedure must be adopted to explain the Bible, I can no longer accept it as a book of truth. My reason, as truly God-given as revelation itself, revolts against these methods of interpretation. I cannot accept a book which has to be interpreted after this fashion." This is not an imaginary case. Every community contains persons who have actually been driven by a zealous but mistaken method of interpreting the Scripture into a kind of indefinite half-hearted unbelief.

WITHOUT entering into the history of these misleading methods, we may mention two of the most dangerous presuppositions which prevail to-day among Bible students, and from the influence of which probably very few of us are wholly free. "The Bible is the word of God, a spiritual being; *therefore its contents at every point have a spiritual sense.* It is the supreme work

of the student to ascertain this spiritual sense, to penetrate into the spiritual depths. The literal sense is of the least importance, the hidden spiritual sense is the most probable." The influence of this principle, variously modified, can be traced from Origen down to the present day. The inventive imagination could bring out of the mind the most brilliant spiritual treasures. The method has led men into the wildest aberrations and delusions. They could find in the Bible any and every sense they desired. They injected their extreme and absurd vagaries into the Scriptures, and into their theological instruction. They poisoned the exegetical literature of their day, and that poison is still in the system. It is not too much to say that three-fourths of the Bible readers and students of to-day are perpetuating the same spiritualizing and allegorizing methods. Thoughtful men turn from such methods in disgust. They detect at once their arbitrariness and purely imaginative character. If the Bible is so expansive as to admit all the spiritual sense which men claim to find in it, there are in it no certainties. Some one will inquire, "Does the Bible then contain any spiritual truths?" Assuredly. But genealogical tables are genealogical tables, lists of dates are lists of dates, the narrative of a battle is the narrative of a battle. These do not inclose within them some deep undercurrent of spiritual truth unrecognized by the ordinary reader. It is true that they may teach no lessons, but they illustrate Jehovah's dealings with men. To claim to penetrate beneath and find everywhere some deep seated truth is to abuse Scripture. To work after this fashion will only add to the already large number of distrustful skeptical Bible readers.

THE man who has the best interests of the Bible at heart will lose no opportunity to cry down this evil. He will, furthermore, discourage the use of all literature which is permeated by such spiritualizing interpretations. The most popular commentaries to-day are the most injurious. Those which are most widely read are the commentaries capable of doing the most damage. The replete volumes of Matthew Henry, for

example, contain a vast amount of learning and truth, but they are compounded with such erroneous and hurtful methods of interpretation as to injure the genuine faith of many thoughtful students. How can we afford to permit the application of such false methods to the interpretation of the Bible? They only obscure its meaning and alienate those who would be its friends.

“THE Bible is *God's book*. *God is perfect*. *His book, therefore, must be absolutely true in every particular*. To find in it contradiction is to impeach the character of the author. If the author is discredited, the book is of course valueless.” This theory is the working basis of a very large school of interpreters today. According to this theory the Bible is a true record of facts, of science, of chronology, history and philosophy, and may be judged by the standards of science only. By these standards it contains no errors. But the treacherous methods devised to explain apparent errors and contradictions reveal many difficulties. In fact, the ordinary reader whom we desire to reach does not see through the harmony. The difficulties remain. He is troubled by them and he becomes dissatisfied, and in the end he lays the book aside. How often has this happened? In thousands of cases.

THE mistake of the zealous defender of the Bible has been that the purpose of the book has been forgotten. Was the Bible given to man to teach science, chronology, history and philosophy, or was its prime purpose rather to reveal the character of God and his moral government? Suppose a sacred writer speaks of the earth as founded upon pillars, or gives the age of an acceding king as eight years, when the parallel account gives the same as eighteen. These are non-essentials and should not be permitted to stand in the way of a candid study of the Bible. But, it is suggested, such concessions are inconsistent with the theory of inspiration. Here, perhaps, we reach the real root of the difficulty. A particular theory of inspiration has

grown up within two or three centuries,—a theory unknown to Christ or the Apostles, unknown to the early church. This theory demands what the Bible nowhere claims for itself, and it is this theory in accordance with which the Bible must be understood. The test of infallibility at every point is demanded. The Bible measured by this wholly false standard falls short. The thoughtful reader, to say nothing of the student, recognizes this fact, but does not always recognize the falsity of the standard. As a consequence the Bible remains under a ban, and must so remain as long as the false test is insisted upon.

JUST so soon as we are willing to give up this particular theory of inspiration, mechanical and throughout artificial in the extreme, freighted with unreasonable requirements, not only not warranted by the writings themselves, but in direct contradiction to them, men will be ready to take up the Bible as the word of God, and to accept it as an invaluable guide in all things spiritual, in all matters of faith and practice. The former difficulties will vanish, perplexities will disappear, avowed half-believers will believe, and men will everywhere look upon the Bible as a trustworthy guide to lead them up to God.

The failure to recognize the fact that the Bible has grown through many centuries; that God has revealed his truth gradually; that to the inspired writer there was not necessarily given omniscience,—the failure to recognize these things has placed a barrier before a door wide open; a barrier which has shut out seekers after truth more earnest, in many cases, than those who have supposed themselves to be the sole possessors of the truth.

“I CONCEIVE, then, that while the Athenian community was not altogether wrong in the famous condemnation of Socrates as a ‘sophist who had undermined the morals of youth,’ the disciples of Socrates were altogether right in their indignant repudiation of the charge, so far as it affected either the personal morality of the master or his deepest philosophic aims and convictions. On the one hand, . . . we cannot but feel that the negative

effect of the Socratic dialectic must have been argumentatively stronger than the positive ; and that on minds intellectually active and penetrating, but without moral earnestness, this is likely to have been the sole effect. . . . On the other hand, it is really essential to the Socratic method that the perpetual particular skepticism it develops should be combined with a permanent general faith in the common sense of mankind."

There is much in the movement of Biblical Criticism in this century which finds a parallel in the above quotation from Sidgwick's *History of Ethics*. There is a negative element in critical work. To those without strong religious sense it is the only element. Pull the props out, they say. Let the building go. But the building is the "Palace of the Great King," and only that we may make its foundations stronger are we willing to touch them. It is true that Biblical Criticism is dangerous, but for the church to go on in the light of present thought without Biblical Criticism is still more dangerous. The safety of criticism lies where the safety of the Socratic dialectic lay, in moral earnestness ; in a pure desire to find the truth ; above all, in the firm belief that there is a priceless, God-given truth to be found. As the dialectic belonged, properly, only to the moral man, so Biblical Criticism belongs essentially to the Christian man.

This parallel is no chance. The underlying principle, in both cases, is the same. It belongs to all progress of ethical and religious thought, and might be illustrated from the Protestant Reformation, or even from the early history of the Christian church itself. In the probing of all religious problems, the operations of the human mind, with its dangers and its safeguards, are much the same.